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SUBJECT: GROWING ATTENTION TO UAE DEPORTATIONS OF LEBANESE SHI'A

CLASSIFIED BY AMBASSADOR RICHARD G OLSON FOR REASONS 1.4 B AND D.

REF: ABU DHABI 891

¶11. (C) Summary. In the past several months, rumors and press reports of Emirati expulsions of Lebanese Shia and Palestinians linked to Hamas have garnered local and regional attention. The UAE has explained these moves as "security related." The latest round began October 1, with the announcement in Beirut of a new committee representing the 40-45 predominantly Shia Lebanese expelled from the UAE. The committee's inaugural press conference in Beirut was followed shortly by statements of support for deportees from several Hezbollah figures. Soon after, Lebanese Speaker of Parliament and leader of the rival Shia Amal movement, Nabih Berri, announced he would travel to the UAE to meet with President Khalifa to discuss the plight of the deportees. Public statements following the Berri-Khalifa meeting declared the meeting a resounding success, although what was actually accomplished remains unclear. End Summary.

¶12. (C) In early September reports surfaced in the regional and international media asserting that the UAE was in the process of expelling hundred of Palestinians workers -- mostly Gazans -- and Lebanese -- mostly Shia from the Emirates(reftel). More recently, several former UAE residents held an October 1 press conference in Beirut to announce the establishment of a committee to represent the Lebanese deportees from UAE. Businessman Hassan Alayan said the newly formed committee planned to seek reparations from the UAE. The committee also released a statement claiming that the Emirati action "could be a result of U.S. pressure to try to choke off routes of funding for Hezbollah."

¶13. (U) Alayan claimed that three hundred Lebanese Shia had been expelled from the UAE. "Dozens of us," he told the press, were summoned by the UAE security services and asked to spy on fellow Lebanese in the Emirates as well as Hezbollah members, or face deportation. Alayan added that the UAE authorities had put similar pressures on Palestinian workers to inform on Hamas before their expulsions as well (reftel). Hezbollah spiritual leader Grand Ayatollah Fadlallah called on UAE President Sheikh Khalifa bin Zayed to "save hundreds of Lebanese families who have contributed to the development of your country."

¶14. (U) Leader of rival Shia Amal Movement and Speaker of Parliament Nabih Berri traveled to UAE and met with President Khalifa bin Zayed on October 12 to discuss the Lebanese deportees' concerns. Official Emirati press agency WAM reported that President Khalifa assured Berri that the UAE only acts against foreigners who "violate the law" and in exercising its sovereign right does not target any "nationality, religious sect or faction." Berri stated after the meeting that he expressed Lebanon's "gratitude and appreciation to the UAE." Both parties agreed that "the UAE would take steps to solve the situation according to Emirati law." It is far from clear this means anything, since the deportations were legal under Emirati law.

¶ 5. (S) Comment: We have also seen reports of private sector workers of other Arab and Muslim nationalities deported by UAE authorities for suspected ties to Iranian-linked groups, leading some observers, including the "Wall Street Journal," to conclude that the UAE is targeting Shia as a potential threat "because of the religious affiliation they share with the Iranians." From our perspective, the issue is different. The Emirati leadership is profoundly concerned that military conflict over Iran's nuclear program is likely, and that the UAE will be directly impacted. We have seen several indications of preparations for that contingency, including the expulsion of expatriates believed to have the potential to form a fifth column. UAE officials have told us that the expulsions are based on specific behavior, not generic profiling. Abu Dhabi Crown Prince Sheikh Mohammed has made it clear repeatedly to senior U.S. officials that in the event of an Israeli pre-emptive attack on Iran he believes Tehran will release terrorist cells against the U.S. and her allies. End Comment.

OLSON